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Negro Americans and the African Dream

THREE are many urgent problems the Negroes in the United States must face, but there is one, aesthetic as well as social in its implications, which has created a good deal of heart-searching and spirited controversy. It still constitutes a minor but nonetheless challenging aspect of the complex Negro problem. Usually it is stated in the form of an exclusive alternative: either the Negroes in the United States agree to go back to Africa and settle there permanently in their own homeland or else they concentrate all their energy on the central task of becoming full-fledged American citizens. Historically, however, the decision has already been made for them. The plan of migration to Africa, over a century old since its inception, will never succeed so long as the Negroes in this country have a voice in the matter. Their roots are deep in this land, and it is here that they and their descendants will work out their destiny or not at all.

If the Negroes in the United States have no intention of "returning" to Africa, why then this furore about African culture and African art? Why these public presentations of racial brotherhood? Why this talk of racial solidarity transcending political loyalties and nationalistic interests? The paradox is easily explained. Every rejected and despised minority group must find for itself a homeland of the spirit. Yet such regressive shifts of allegiance are unsatisfactory and bound to increase rather than alleviate neurotic conflict. The African craze, like the abortive literary renaissance in Harlem during the twenties, will die out.

Not that there is anything reprehensible in Negroes taking a profound interest in the social, political, and cultural life of Africa, just as there can be no objection to American Jews supporting the efforts of their co-religionists to escape from the horror of Europe and establish a homeland in Palestine. The American Jew's philanthropic liberalism, however, does not cast any reflection on his tested loyalty as a citizen. The Negro is in a much worse plight. He is attacked and ostracized on the ground that he is "racially" different. By identifying himself with the people of Africa, he confirms and strengthens the racial stereotype. Aside from that, he should be aware of the acculturating forces that have drawn him magnetically and against his will to the lodestone of Africa. In fleeing from the cruel dominance of the white man, he still responds to the mastery of his will. If American Negroes had been harmoniously integrated into American life, the call of Africa would have

remained as remote as that of the Fiji Islanders or the people of Siam. Hence to avoid being stigmatized as a uniquely different and unassimilable race of African ancestry, they should at all times emphasize their essential Americanism. The Negro problem may well become a world problem. It is not, and should not be converted into an African problem, an irreconcilable conflict between the blacks and the whites.

But there are forces which, by segregating the American Negro socially, economically, and culturally, make him long for some avenue of escape from the stifling atmosphere he is compelled to breathe. The effort to isolate the Negro intensifies his racial consciousness and drives him as a desperate measure to identify himself with all colored people who are the victims of discrimination. Racial solidarity is then looked upon as the road to salvation. Discrimination builds up a nation within a nation, and eventually creates a sense of unity that is no longer national but racial.

The American Negro has to pass through a difficult and complex process of adjustment to his environment. What of his relation to Africa and African culture? It is impossible to revive African speech and African customs. The idea of some day returning to Africa is a spurious solution. The only culture the American Negroes know is that of the United States. Hence their problem is fundamentally one of assimilation. They must equal if not surpass the whites by incorporating American culture within their personality structure.

After more than three centuries of assimilation, the Negro in the United States is totally different from the Negro who remained in his original habitat. The former speaks the language Shakespeare and Emerson, Lincoln and Whitman spoke. When given the opportunity he absorbs the culture of this land as fully and as fruitfully as the whites themselves. It becomes an integral part of him. He is in all essential respects an American. Hitherto Africa has been regarded as a dark continent, peopled by savages without a culture and without a past. Melville J. Herskovits wrote a book refuting what he considered a vicious as well as unfounded charge and demonstrating that African culture was not only vigorous and fertile but that it has also survived in the American Negro community. Whereas the first part of the thesis is true, the second, namely, that the ancestral culture of Africa has left a number of enriching survivals in the life of the American Negro, is not only unproved but highly dangerous. What are these survivals and how are they to be identified and measured? Does not such a theory tend to revive the exploded fallacy of "racial character" and "racial inheritance"? Such doctrines reinforce the popular stereotype that the Negro is not American but basically African. If he still carries within him the cultural survivals of his racial ancestry, what hope is there of

ever assimilating him within the American cultural pattern? It is not on the ground of expediency alone that this "ideology" disguised as anthropology is to be counteracted. If it is true, it must, of course, be accepted, but it is not true. What must be made emphatically clear is that the Negro, like the Anglo-Saxon, is in this country to stay, and that he has as much right to be considered a native American as any one else.

Negroes, however, are at no time allowed to forget the race problem, and out of this handicap Negro (and, now recently, white) writers create a religion of race. The race motif reigns supreme. In fact, it reaches a point where fraternal alliance with the black people throughout the world becomes the dominant, militant aim. The movement thus represents a return to origins, a "return," in spirit, to the motherland. It is in part a violent repudiation of American civilization. Alain Locke, in *The New Negro* (1925), declares that the Negro's inner objective was "an attempt to repair a damaged group psychology and reshape a warped social perspective," but the attempt was certain to end in frustration because the philosophy of racial unity was essentially a retreat, a flight from intolerable reality. Especially those who have turned their heart toward Africa are suffering from the desire for escape and the need for compensating faith in racial integrity.

The backward glance to Africa is evident not only in explicit racial references but also in the field of aesthetics where we would least expect to find it. The belief that the white man suffers from excessive intellectualism while the Negro is alive with earthy feelings, a creature compounded purely of instincts, is a dualism that has Africa as its background and ideological justification. One writer forthrightly declares: "The white man has made a fetish of intellect and worships the God of thought; the Negro feels rather than thinks, experiences emotions directly rather than interprets them by roundabout and devious abstractions, and apprehends the outside world by means of intuitive perceptions instead of through a carefully built up system of logical analysis." Here is a broad, vague, confusing generalization which lumps all Negroes into one category. It is poor psychology, as Otto Klineberg's work convincingly attests. Who wrote this farrago of nonsense? None other than Paul Robeson in "The Spectator" (June 15, 1934).

Such double-edged generalizations are dangerous. To persist in this neo-primitive strain is to sear the brand of anti-intellectualism indelibly on the colored race. The Negro is thus forced to choose between Africa and America. He has really no alternative. He will only debase himself if he panders to the white man's desire to categorize Negroes as a separate race, primitive, earth-bound, childlike in its instinctive impulses and emotional spontaneity. He must seek the light of Western

culture, even if it means he must compete against the white man. He must by all means get knowledge and master the ideas and technology of American civilization. In short, he must regard himself primarily as an American, not a Negro; an American, not a descendant of Africa. He cannot run away to some paradisiacal retreat in Liberia where he will be free from the horror of racial oppression. He must work out his salvation in this land. America is fate. America is home.

Significantly enough, there is not a single case of a notable Negro writer who has ever seriously entertained the idea of establishing a Negro commonwealth in Africa where American Negroes might settle among their own people. Such a proposal would have constituted a flagrant betrayal of all that the Negroes have striven and fought for since they were first imported as slaves. But the tendency to extol Negro art as untutored and primitive in mentality is tantamount to sending the Negro back to Africa and alienating him from his American culture. Yet the editor of *The New Negro* argued the thesis that the Negro could discover a fruitful source of tradition in the African arts; there was the cultural fountainhead, the creative heritage, which he could exploit with profit. There is, he declared, "a real and vital connection between this new artistic respect for African heritage and the natural ambition of Negro artists for a racial idiom in their art of expression." A more abysmally wrong aesthetic conception, and a dangerous one at that, could not have been fathered. It dives off the deep end, making the grand but foolishly reckless gesture of repudiation. This "new direction" leads to a cultural dead end, to increased frustration, to intensified racial stereotyping. It makes an ardent but hopeless flight to Ultima Thule, an act of psychic suicide.

Why this feverish stress on the ancestral racial heritage in the arts? Why this ambiguous reference to a racial idiom? Such emphasis on the primitive endowment of the Negro helps to keep him imprisoned in a black ghetto of art. Here is a self-imposed and suicidal method of cultural segregation: Negro art as invidiously African in spirit and primitive in form and substance. The African tradition so temptingly served up proves the undoing of the Negro artist, if he ventures to take it seriously. To seek to remain authentically Negroid is to cut himself off from the shaping vital influences of the American environment. Whatever literature or art the Negro in this country produces is American and nothing but American.

As E. Franklin Frazier intelligently sums up the problem in an essay contributed to *Ebony and Topaz*: "to turn within the group experience for artistic creation and group tradition is entirely different from seeking in the biological inheritance of the race for new values, attitudes, and a different order of mentality." There is no aesthetic and surely no

anthropological justification for the thesis that Negroes can create a *unique* culture within the American environment. It is even a mistake on the part of the Negro writer to confine himself exclusively to his group experience. In that way he restricts and impoverishes his art. The Negro is exposed more or less to the same influences and traditions and experiences as the whites. Whatever his past origins, the Negro writer is essentially an American, and the sooner he becomes aware of that fact and acts on that faith the better his work will be. It is not at all surprising that those Negro artists who tried to imitate the African tradition failed. As James A. Porter declares in *Modern Negro Art*: "The Negro way of life is permeated with American manners, and the Negro mind is responsive to American ideals. Whether or not the Negro realizes these ideals, he is first and always an American, whatever his cultural past in Africa may have been."

There is an unconscious cultural conspiracy in crudely identifying some of the institutional habits of the American Negro, which are socio-economic in origin, with those of a seemingly similar nature in Africa. It is unfortunate that Negro critics, by supporting this "Africanized" aesthetics, should have abetted this spurious system of cultural anthropology. This is worse than naive; it is defeatist. The Negro will eventually escape from the curse of color, but if he persists in consummating this racial marriage with Africa he is forever doomed. Alienated from America, he will become a racial Ishmaelite. The modern American Negro who is, every inch of him, as much an American as the proud descendants of the Mayflower, is transformed into a primitive creature of African earth. It can then be shown that witchcraft and divination in Harlem and the "thick-lipped speech" of some Negroes are racial carry-overs from Africa.

True enough, the American Negro writer cannot escape the hand of the past. No one can, but what kinship, biological or cultural, can he feel with the African past? Why then is he drawn so powerfully to this distant land and the people who dwell there? The answer, of course, is that his experience in America has made him sensitively aware of the plight of colored people the world over. He joins them in the masonic brotherhood of suffering and persecution. What binds them strongly together is the sense of racial unity against a hostile white population that not only exploits and oppresses them but also dogmatically assumes that it is racially superior. An American descended three generations back from Dutch or Italian or Hungarian parentage feels no particular nostalgia for his "mother" country. It is no more than a geographical spot on the map, of no more interest than any of the other European countries. But Africa for some Negroes is homeland in a peculiarly different sense; it is the land from which they were dragged by force to serve as slaves in America; it is the land in which his brethren are

still virtually enslaved by the whites; it is the land which he can call his own and which he hopes will some day become a free and proudly independent nation.

Consider the case of Eslanda Goode Robeson, wife of Paul Robeson, and her book *African Journey*. What was the underlying motive for her journey? This urge to return to "her land," her own people, was born of embittered color consciousness. The racial complex is the product of a white culture in which Negroes are rejected as aliens and treated as an inferior caste. The traumatic experience of alienation in white America forces them back upon themselves. The withdrawal of introversion, followed by impulses of flight to Africa, is intensified by the pattern of racial persecution in the United States. As the result of leading this slum-shocked existence in black ghettos, Negroes cultivate a sense of communalism, a "folk" spirit, a feeling of racial solidarity. The next step is obviously a leap of the imagination beyond the hateful American scene. The intuitive realization that the color complex is international in scope culminates in the triumphant feeling of blood-kinship with Africans and with Africa, the ancestral homeland. This is the theme-song of "the return" to Africa, the search for the long-lost father—a movement which, though moribund, has not yet died. Out of all this there finally emerges the mystical experience of transcendence, the universalization of "color" and "blood," the identification with colored people the world over.

The motives that led Mrs. Robeson to undertake the journey and write her book bear directly on the Negro problem in the United States. Her writing expresses the Negro's longing for an ancestral homeland, an African Zion, for a tradition, a noble past which can be turned into a glorious future. If America rejects the Negro, then he examines his racial antecedents and restlessly seeks to return to his "homeland." But this "return" involves a repudiation of America. The outcast casts off his native roots and endeavors to find himself in a different clime and among his own people.

Thus "regression" points to a radical shifting in the field of social forces. The journey to Africa has implications that extend beyond the cult of racial solidarity in the United States. Black Nationalism becomes Black Internationalism. The Negro mind is driven to identify itself culturally with "race" and "color." As Mrs. Robeson confesses, her horizon was first confined to the Negro problem in America. Not until she began to travel did she become aware of the fact that the Negro problem was international in scope. It embraced not only the thirteen million Negroes in the United States but also the 150 million exploited Negroes in Africa and the ten million Negroes in the West Indies. This was a world problem. Thus her eyes were opened and she could see.

The mind-forged manacles were broken. She made the liberating discovery that the color problem reaches out in all directions. Feverishly she read everything she could gather about Africa and its people. "At last I began to find out something about my 'old country,' my background, my people, and thus about myself."

The search for racial origins was a search for integrity, an experiment in achieving the integrity of the alienated self. Intuitively she felt that she was much better qualified to speak for the people of Africa than many of the white anthropologists. As a Negro she knew what Negroes think and feel. She refused to accept the argument of the anthropologists under whom she studied that she was, after all, European in her cultural outlook. "I'm Negro. I'm African myself," she retorted with heat. It is most revealing, this passionate espousal of the Africans, this angry rejection of the Africans as primitives. Though her logic was deficient, her instincts, she felt, were wholly in the right. Deep in her heart she was convinced that these Africans were her people, imbued with the same aspirations, sustained by the same values, possessed of the same humor and humanity. "I blush with shame," she writes, "for the mental picture my fellow Negroes in America have of our African brothers: wild black savages in leopard skins, waving spears and eating meat raw." But why, aside from the propaganda disseminated by missionaries and traders and anthropologists carrying the white man's burden, should Mrs. Robeson have doubted for a moment that Africans, given the proper educational and economic advantages, could advance in civilization as far as the whites, if not further? Were not the American Negroes descendants of diverse African stock?

Not that there is anything sinister in this feeling of affinity with Africa. Mrs. Robeson was drawn mystically to Africa, not to China or India, because of the cultural compulsives in her environment: compulsives that make of blackness a fatality. Negroes throughout the world speak a common language: the language of the humiliated and the injured, the language of the scorned, the rejected, the resentful. The whites, in their blind arrogance, their cultural as well as economic imperialism, have brought about this rising tide of color.

There is another perspective through which to view this overvaluation of Africa. For some reason, primitive African art has of late exerted a potent influence on the mind of the West. There is nothing wrong with this influence, if it were not overlaid with a cloudy metaphysical aesthetic of African worship and pseudo-racial theorizing. The extraordinary figures carved centuries ago in the dark obscurity of the jungle by nameless artists bring into being a kind of art not only unknown to the European but beyond the reach of his skill. This understanding of African art marks a new stage in the evolution of art appreciation. These fetishes were beheld with new eyes; they no longer appeared

childish, ridiculous, repellent. In fact, the vogue grew to such proportions that it developed into an ecstatic cult: dark Africa became a generative source of beauty and value, a mother of inspiration, the basis for a neo-primitive art. Negro-African art, precisely because it was primitive, unsophisticated, naive, was lavishly admired. There was a compelling lure about the art of the primitive. All virtue was now concentrated in the noble African savage. The African fetish, Paul Guillaume and Thomas Munro declare in *Primitive Negro Sculpture*, was "an excuse for dreaming of deep mysterious forests, tom-toms and weird incantations, of dark warriors and women of the tropics."

All this has tended to create a sentimental and slightly hysterical aesthetic philosophy which specializes in talk about African consciousness and the uncorrupted glory of the primitive. But it is extremely difficult to reconstruct the primitive Negro mind as it actually was before its disintegrating contact with white civilization. The civilized Negro is utterly unlike his forbears. Mrs. Robeson is perfectly right: Africa today under European rule is no longer primitive Africa. Yet an art critic like Albert C. Barnes, writing on "Negro Art and America," calls the artistic contribution of the American Negro sound because it comes "from a primitive nature upon which a white man's education has never been harnessed." To which one must reply with unmistakable emphasis that all this is nonsense. And Arthur A. Schomburg argued that the American Negro must "remake his past in order to make his future. . . . For him, a group tradition must supply compensation for persecution, and pride of race the antidote for prejudice." Therefore: go back to African cultural origins, reactivate the primitive strain in the Negro, restore his racial memory and pride of race. While the assumption that the Negroes are a people without a history is false to the hilt, the assumed corollary, namely, that the modern Negro must return to Africa for inspiration and creative nourishment which he cannot hope to find in America, is even more fallacious and absurd.

The American Negroes are Americans in language, dress, customs, ways of thinking. After three centuries of residence in the United States, they have learned to accept, though with interesting modifications, the "white" norms of beauty, taste, and conduct. The way they live at present is not a matter of racial individuality; it is dictated by cultural and economic conditions and compulsions beyond their control.
